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ABSTRACT

Children's speech styles vary considerably, ranging along a continuum from formal to informal, in the various educational and social settings they encounter in school. Teachers who see their role as preparing children to fill social roles will be aware of the speech styles that children use and will accept varying speech styles as appropriate to varying settings. In operating classrooms so that children can develop and use a repertoire of speech styles, teachers should realize that different classroom situations promote different speech styles ranging from intimate to casual to consultative and finally to formal. They should be aware that speech style is also influenced by group size, which may range from dyadic situations to large groups; by the relationship between children, which ranges from intimate to formal; by the distance between speaker and listener; and by the subject matter being taught. By adapting instructional settings and activities in accordance with the various factors affecting speech styles, teachers can create realistic situations that promote appropriate speech. (GT)

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# RECOGNIZING AND DEVELOPING

# CHILDREN'S SPEECH STYLES

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## RECOGNIZING AND DEVELOPING CHILDREN'S SPEECH STYLES

Most of us involved in teaching children know that the classroom is not just a microcosm within the macrocosm of the school. A perceptive 'outsider' can observe a teacher and class in action, and will note that facts, knowledge, and information dissemination and processing really only make up part of the time spent in school. The keen observer will quickly recognize the classroom as a social setting. Sometimes the educational and social settings of the classroom meld, as in a social studies lesson where groups of children are discussing and discovering something of pioneer life. At other times the education setting might predominate, as in the teacher-led math lesson on addition of fractions, and at other times the social setting will surface as the class plans a Valentine's Day Party. But in general the educational (academic and intellectual) function of the classroom goes along with social function.

Concomitant with the learning of skills, concepts and processes, and often separate from these, children in school are learning to act and interact in a variety of social situations. Because children do not spend all of their school hours in the classroom, the school day as a whole provides a variety of educational and social settings. There is the work setting of the classroom, the audience setting of the school assembly or concert, the play setting of the playground, the study setting of the resource centre or library, and the games/sports setting of the gym.

What we really don't notice, because it is such a natural part of our own sociolinguistic behaviour, is that the language that children use in each of these settings varies quite considerably. To be more exact, the speech style varies from one setting to another with most children. All of the educational and social settings just mentioned range along a continuum of formal to informal or casual. The most formal setting is probably the school assembly, and the most casual or informal setting is the playground.

Speech styles are also going to vary along a continuum of formal to informal. A formal style of speaking will characterize the school assembly, while a casual or colloquial use of language will predominate in the playground. Different styles of language are appropriate in different settings throughout the school day, and in varied classroom settings.

Since a deliberate educational setting hardly describes the school playground during a recess, I am going to describe school settings in which children use language as social settings. Language is so intimately involved with social setting that when children, or adults, don't use the appropriate speech style in a particular situation they feel alienated. Many children who are loners in the playground are rejected by their peers because they can't converse in that setting. In the classroom, a different social setting as well as an educational setting, these same children may have a good working relationship with their peers. In the classroom these same children 'all speak the same language'. Teachers who see their role as preparing children to fill social roles will be aware of the speech styles that children use, and more important, will accept all speech styles as <u>appropriate in their social settings</u>.

This type of sociolinguistic acceptance is in contrast to the attitude that once prevailed in schools where only one speech style, a formal one, was considered appropriate. Children quickly learned that there was one language for the teacher which bore little resemblance to how they spoke in their everyday affairs. Today the notion of a linguistic norm, or acceptable style of speech, has all but dissipated. Reading and language arts texts now include stories in which children speak naturally, using colloquialisms, abbreviated language forms, and interjections. Current children's literature reveals the same recognition of how children really speak in different situations.

With the recognition that children, as do adults, have a repertoire of speech styles appropriate to different situations, the question for teachers is how to operate classrooms so that children can develop and use a repertoire of speech styles.

Four scales of style determinancy can be used to discuss children's situational use of language. Each scale shows how the factor determines to some extent the language that children can be expected to use in the particular situation, which can be visualized as a point along the scale. Each scale is titled to identify each of the four factors.

SPEECH STYLE

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intimate casual consultative formal

The first scales is that of Speech Style. This scale will be used in discussion of the other three scales too. The least formal style is to the left, the most formal to the right. The four styles of speech identified here are not discrete, and sometimes more than one style will occur in a particular situation. For example, two children role-playing an interview with a pioneer in a social studies presentation might use both casual (pioneer) and consultative (interviewer) styles. For establishing classroom language situations the four styles are useful. These four styles are taken from Joos (1967).

When we pair children for discussion, and particularly when we allow them to talk about personal shared experiences, we can expect them to adopt an intimate style of speech. The intimate style reflects the use of language that operates almost at the thought level of both speaker and listener. It is characterized by an economy of words and a high incidence of nonverbal communication such as gestures and facial expressions. It is also characteristic of people who know each other very well.

A casual situation and speech style is likely to occur when three or four children are grouped to orally discuss a shared experience such as a game or sport, social event, or field trip that the class participated in. The casual style assumes a shared background. Sentences are not necessarily complete. There is free and easy participation of both speaker and listener, and unconventional usage such as slang and colloquialism mark this style.

The consultative situation is probably the one that is prevalent in most classrooms. It is also the one in which most adults probably engage in their daily work and business affairs. In the classroom it occurs when four to six children are grouped to discuss prescribed content material, that is, subject matter that does not come from the shared experience of the group. A consultative situation also prevails in most teacher-led question and response sequences, and in teacher-initiated class discussion. The consultative style is indicative of persons who have a limited shared background. It features free and easy participation of both speaker and listeners, though there is at least one dominant speaker in any group. Sentences are complete, and background information is supplied, rather than implied.

A formal situation is created when a child is asked to give an oral presentation to his or her class, to another group of children, or at a school assembly. It also occurs when a teacher adopts a lecture approach and there is little or no teacher-pupil interaction. Formal style is characterized by complete sentences that reflect a logical development of thought and careful planning. A child who gives a formal presentation is prepared, and has usually noted main points in order on a file card for reference. Background information is provided, and speech is rehearsed rather than impromptu. In the formal situation the listener's active participation drops out, except maybe for a brief question-answer period at the end of the presentation.

## GROUP SIZE

dyadic large

All speech styles are responsive to group size. The larger the group the more formal the style, the smaller the group, down to a pair, the less formal the style. In the classroom the largest group is the total class, and beyond the classroom is the assembled school. How a teacher groups children for language activities will influence to a large extent the style of speech that children will adopt.

ADDRESSEE/ADDRESSOR RELATIONSHIP

intimate — formal

The relationship between children in a group will also influence the speech style used. The relationship will, to a large extent, depend on group size. An intimate relationship will probably exist in a pair where both children know each other very well. The same pair will behave differently as part of a larger group. Their relationship will be more formal, and this will be reflected in their style of speech.

ADDRESSEE/ADDRESSOR DISTANTIATION

tête-à-tête — distant

This scale suggest that as the speaker-listener distance increases so the situation becomes more formal. When children are given practice in orally reporting to the class, often in book reports, teachers ask children to stand in front of the class, physically some distance from them. On the other hand, when a teacher wants to create a casual or intimate situation, such as discussing and planning an upcoming Grade One visit to the post office, she will ask the children to sit around her on the carpeted floor, as close as possible. She minimizes the addressee-addressor distance.

Another important factor determining speech styles in the classroom is that of subject matter. This factor is difficult to represent as a continuum. Less formal speech styles are characterized by shared experiences or common experiences, where most background information is already provided and therefore taken for granted. This makes the casual situation, where three or four children are grouped, appropriate for discussion of reactions to a story read, or for discussion and evaluation of a field trip.

The consultative and formal situations are characterized by limited or no shared experience, and therefore much background

information needs to be supplied to group members. These situations then are appropriate for disseminating information. The consultative situation, which allows for listener participation throughout, certainly works well with children, and so this situation predominates in classrooms. Teacher-pupil and pupil-pupil interaction occur. In the formal situation the onus for learning is almost solely with the listener, and there is minimal listener participation. Consequently we find that the lecture method is used widely at the college and university level.

Learning, of course, takes place in all four situations, and learning to be a social being takes place in all situations. Speakers adapt their language to different situations, and social settings are determined by speech styles. The style of speech adopted by a person can include or exclude that person from a group.

Elementary school teachers can provide opportunities for children to develop and use a repertoire of speech styles appropriate to different situations in which children do, and will, become involved. By attention to group size, addressee/addressor relationships and distance, the type and nature of children's previous experiences, and the type of subject matter, teachers can create for their children 'real' situations for appropriate speech.

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